

## “The Instruments of Destiny”: Reception of the *Iliad* in American Great War Poetry

Almost a century after the conclusion of the First World War, much of the classical reception within contemporary war poetry remains unexamined. Nevertheless, a close reading of war poetry before and during the First World War reveals that poets and their audiences found meaning and representation in the classical tradition, especially in Homer’s *Iliad*. When considering the canonical works of early Modernist poetry, especially concerning the “War to End All Wars,” many think first of the British public-school boys that arrived on the front lines stuffed full of ancient Greek epithets and Virgilian lines only to lose all tradition in the unprecedented horrors of the trenches. However, research like Dr. Elizabeth Vandiver’s reveals that the classical tradition in Britain was neither relegated to the elite nor only referenced to be refuted and instead was understood and utilized by all manner of poets for all sorts of agendas. Rather than typifying a certain approach, the classics became a way for all affected by the war to rationalize, understand, and cope with their experiences in the age of modern warfare. Furthermore, in the case of the *Iliad*, the British troops’ experiences fighting a war that dragged on years longer than expected over a slight involving other nations recalled and paralleled the situation of the Argives nicely, which inspired several poems invoking the might of Achilles and Hector, such as Shaw-Stewart’s famous “I Saw A Man This Morning.”

Like unto the British, American poets grappling with the Great War utilized the classical tradition to contextualize the war. While the American intellectual tradition’s relationship with the classics remains more distant and aesthetically-based than the European schools, it does stem heavily from the nation’s foundation on republican Roman virtues and Greek democracy, at least in name. In fact, colleges and schools across the nation promoted their classical curricula to

attract bright, young students and provide a valuable education. While the American Civil War and the effects of Industrialization led schools to turn away from classical teaching and towards trade schools and elective courses, the effects of classical education still lingered in American society at the turn of the twentieth century.

One of the most lasting effects that a classical education imparted to American poets was its common view of aesthetics as moral education. Werner Jaeger notes the didactic aspect of aesthetics. Just as Homer used his lyrical poetry to uphold the tenets of *kleos* and battlefield ethics, so also did American poets such as Joyce Kilmer and Alan Seeger imbue their verse with moralizing imagery to encourage their fellow Americans to volunteer, and eventually enlist, in the war effort. The American view of the First World War as a war between moral systems also enforced the didactic nature of contemporary poets' work, which stands in contrast to its more famous and canonical British counterparts, who were focused on the sacrifice needed for their civilization's survival. In this paper, I argue that Americans, though further removed from the classical tradition than their European allies, similarly utilized the *Iliad* and other classical concepts to champion their cause as missionaries of American ideals such as freedom in the First World War as well as to cope with the trauma induced by modern warfare.

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